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Crossing Cultural and Gender Borders to Change the Way We Use Discourse in the Classroom

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Though many teachers have adopted collaborative models for teaching writing and literature, much of classroom discussion, in small or large groups, is driven by the assumption that arguing ideas is a competitive exercise. Generally, essays written in this context are “counter-positional” and “agonistic,” supporting points by eliminating/discrediting others and shaped by either/or extremes. Such extreme views create false dichotomies rather than thought-out perspectives, a reflection of the often counter-productive argument students see most in the media. Such argumentation actually polarizes people and shuts down dialogue. To adopt other models, we need to look across the borders of argumentative discussion. This essay offers two alternative models of collaboration and essay construction, one from India, based in an approach to argument known as *Nyāya*, the other based on feminist perspectives based in the ideas of Sonja Foss and Cynthia Griffin).

Though Deborah Tannen’s book, *Argument Culture*, focuses largely on argumentation in the media, she attributes some of the problem to how students are taught to argue: “rather than asking students to explore the idea to find what’s good and useful in it will only ask how

can we attack it, setting up debates where people learn not to listen to each other because they're so busy trying to win the debate" (Gergen Interview). Cynthia Caywood and Lynn Overing similarly describe academic writing itself: "Certain forms of discourse and language are privileged... the argumentative essay set above the autobiographical; the clear evocation of a thesis preferred to a more organic exploration of a topic; the impersonal, rational voice ranked more highly than the intimate, subjective one" (Quoted in Lamb 283). This combination assures that argumentation is mostly taught as a competitive, eristic, and agonistic mode of thinking.

Such a view of argument, though deeply entrenched in the West, is not as "natural" as it might seem. Other cultures have developed other models. For instance, from about 550 BCE to 150 CE, an argumentative pattern, used both descriptively and proscriptively, developed in ancient India called the *Nyāya* method (Matilal), which was based in, among other texts, the philosopher Gautama's *Nyāyasūtra* (Lloyd, "Cultural," "Rhetorical," "Rethinking"). The *Sutras* provide guidelines, as well as philosophical justification, for debate, and its methods were adopted by all six schools of orthodox Hindu philosophy and by Buddhist and other Indian sects, and its influence continues today.

Nyāya centralizes because-type arguments made immediately understandable through a shared analogy.

Pratijñā (claim): The hill is on fire

Hetu (reason): Because of smoke

Dṛṣṭānta (example): Like in the hearth

Upanaya This is so (application of the analogy)

Nigamana The hill is on fire

Writers like Aristotle admit that abstract chains of reasoning can confuse audiences.

Nyāya's inherently *narrative* nature, based in an analogue applied to a claim/reason enthymeme, makes it instantly comprehensible. Also, because it must be based in analogy shared by rhetor and audience, it is focused more on shared truth than just the truth of the speaker.

For example, an argument in the medieval *Simhasana Dvatrimśika* reveals how embedded this claim/reason/analogy formulation had become by that time. Here the people respond to the selfless acts of King Vikramaditya with a passage that both praises him and reminds him of his sacred duty:

The tree suffers the sharp summer heat

Upon its head, but with its shade

It gives comfort to those

Who seek shelter under it.

This is your nature too.

Unmindful of your own ease,

You endure pains every day

For the sake of your people. (161-2)

In this poetic passage we see the signature *Nyāya* approach of combining a claim and reason with an analogue. If we set it in the *Nyāya* formulation, we can see the full structure:

Pratijñā (claim): Unmindful of your own ease, you endure pains every day for the sake of your people

Hetu (reason): [Because] It is your nature.

Drṣṭānta (example): Like the tree taking the sun to provide shade.

Such arguments make sense to Westerners because we too argue by analogy, but the *Nyāya* method reached a prominence in Indian society that gives its author Gotama a status comparable to Aristotle in the West (Junankar 6). Unlike Gotama, Aristotle never joined enthymeme with example, though he defined them as the key elements of rhetorical argument (Lloyd, “Rethinking,” “Culture”).

In addition, while Aristotle defines argument in terms of the rhetor’s movement of the audience to his position, the *Nyāya Sutra* describes “fruitful” argument as *vāda* (translated variously as “philosophical discussion”, “please speak,” or even “kindly speak”), a seeking together of sharable truth (Matilal 2). This concept closely relates to *Nyāya*’s rejection of the usual motives of argument, desire, and fear, fear being only the logical opposite of desire. Seeking sharable truth rather than self-aggrandizement assures that the process will be as productive as possible. Through the process of *vāda*, we attain *mokṣa*, release from the cycle of rebirth: “pain, birth, activity, faults [defects], and misapprehension [wrong notion]—on the successive annihilation of these in the reverse order, there follows release” (Radhakrishnan and Moore 358). Rhetoric, rather than being deployed as a way to get our way, is used to help people experience the universal energy of life that unites us all.

In short, *Nyāya* centers on three key concepts: 1. Arguments should include sharable analogies tied to enthymemic because/reason arguments. 2. Arguers should consciously sift their motives for arguing, sifting out motives of fear or desire. 3. Argument should be libratory for all interlocutors involved.

Seeking also a model of sharable perspectives, Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin, in their 1995 article on *Invitational Rhetoric*, note that “Embedded in efforts to change others is a desire

for control and domination, for the act of changing another establishes the power of the change agent over that other” (*Communication Monographs* 3). They offer instead of this “conquest” or “conversion” model (“Speech Communication” 2), alternative conceptions of rhetoric sensitive to “feminist principles,” such as the “commitment to the creation of relationships of equality,” “the elimination of the dominance and elitism that characterize most human relationships,” “the immanent value of all living beings,” and “self- determination” (*Communication Monographs* 4).

This “invitational rhetoric” constitutes “an invitation to the audience to enter the rhetor’s world and see it as the rhetor does. In presenting a particular perspective, the invitational rhetor does not judge or denigrate other’s perspectives but is open to and tries to appreciate and validate those perspectives, even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor’s own....” Their notion of invitational rhetoric is not just about understanding issues, but upon “an understanding of the participants themselves” (*Communication Monographs* 5). They stress that for these elements to work, the rhetor must create an environment of “safety, value, and freedom” (10) and embody their argument, not just assent to it.

Writers Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana Cloud critique this model because it “presupposes” the “rare” condition of “economic, political, social and equality among interlocutors” (220), and of course, the model is idealistic in this way. It, however, actually addresses inequality in the concept of invitation itself. Trust can be gained in unequal situations when rhetors extend it to one another. Foss and Griffin note that even if the rhetor’s offer is rejected, “The maintenance of the connection between the rhetor and audience remains intact” because the “audience still is valued and appreciated by the rhetor” (*Communication*

Mongraphs 12).

In sum, both models use discourse as a way to discover and explore ideas and alternatives, seek unique and common points of view, and emphasize perceived, rather than just accepted or logical/analytical truth. The Indian model brings this about through the use of enthymeme and analogy while encouraging motive sifting before engagement (arguers seek truth rather than argue from fear or desire). The Feminist approach emphasizes argument as invitation (the audience is respected and free to decide without coercion) and promotes argument as embodiment (the arguer makes describable efforts to live their beliefs).

My concern in bringing both invitational and *Nyāya* reasoning into the classroom is how to embody the principles of both within the structure and content of the course. A junior-level course called “Argumentative Writing,” offered at Kent State, seemed like the ideal place.

From the beginning of the course, I attempt to create an environment of respect, freedom, and safety in the classroom. Students assume an agonistic model of argument will be taught, so I immediately encourage them to re-think their assumptions about argument. This attempt at conversion may not fit the ideals of invitational rhetoric, but it is necessary for reasons I outline below.

Because I believe students should know why they are being taught what they are being taught, articles on *Nyāya* and Invitational Rhetoric are on the reading list, and we discuss also Deborah Tannen’s book *Argument Culture* and Gerry Spence’s *How to Argue and Win Every Time*, which surprisingly, given Spence’s national status as a winning lawyer, reinterprets “winning” in terms of establishing and keeping relationships rather than dominating. We watch videos and read articles featuring speakers using combative approaches and those using what

we identify together as more “invitational approaches.” In particular, three videos, one of Naomi Wolfe on *Fox News*, one of James Baldwin in a speech in the sixties, and one of linguist John McWhorter, offer visible examples of alternate approaches. Wolfe defuses a hostile interviewer, Baldwin “suggests” an alternative view of race in the US still applicable today, and McWhorter simply embodies principles of perspective sharing in an interview with Bill Moyers. We discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches and why and how we respond to the arguments. We trace the analogies used by the speakers, and consider how we can experience the truth of their arguments by sifting through our own fears and desires.

Admittedly, I stack the deck in terms of what we read and view in regards to invitational rhetoric simply because it is not the norm in student experience. As we talk about it, like Foss and Griffin, we also discuss which approaches work better for what purposes (“Speech Communication” 36). The problem is that “normal” argument—dividing truth into two opposing camps represented by extreme and often ill-thought positions—is not a tenable alternative. As we have seen in congress and in the progressive deterioration of civil debate in the US, it is more a disease than a medicine. Foss and Griffin note that it exposes a “discrepancy” between our goals and means” (“Speech Communication” 38). In addition, to somehow juxtapose “invitational” vs. traditional rhetoric is to fall into a trap Tannen describes, where our desire to give voice to the “other” side actually legitimizes untenable and even morally corrupt points of view, as when a news channel airs a debate between holocaust survivors with those who claim the holocaust did not happen in some sort of bizarre sense of “balanced” reporting.

While legitimizing traditional rhetoric is problematic, **invitational** rhetoric does indeed

have an idealistic blind spot brought into relief by the same juxtaposition—some beliefs of our interlocutors may be morally or rationally bankrupt. We can respect the interlocutor, invite them to other perspectives, but sometimes we need to speak out for the sake of justice or human rationality. Part of the course is then to assess both argument as is and as invitational, and for this reason, in spite of the course’s obvious emphasis on Indian and feminist ideas, students are free to use the approach they want in their essays, and part of each assignment is to explain why. This must be the case if the course is to live up to its invitational goals.

Because application of both invitational and *Nyāya* methods involve self-analysis and critical thinking, the assignments are progressive—writing at first to share a perspective on an issue of importance to the student, secondly to intentionally research issues of race, power, and culture as they affect an issue of their choice, and third to create a multimediac perspective on an issue of relevance to them. Lastly, they write a reflective essay about what they have learned about argument, and how their writing has embodied that learning. Ultimately, students are encouraged to seek publication of their work through a campus publication or even some of the emerging journals for undergraduates.

As noted, basic to both the Indian and Feminist approaches is motive sifting, so in the middle section of the course, readings are on race, gender, and power. One way to embrace Lozano-Reich and Cloud’s critique is to bring elements of power into the discussion, and to read and watch arguments that debate these issues in both confrontational and invitational manners. For instance, we watched two [YouTube videos](#) on race and gender in Disney films, one of which offers a traditional student-created argument and the other that juxtaposed thoughtful commentary, interspersed with short clips from speakers of various racial and ethnic

backgrounds offering their perspective on different Disney films. We read an article on W.E.B. Dubois and African American “double consciousness,” and then listened to several speakers explaining double consciousness in their experiences. Students read and responded to Peggy McIntosh’s “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” an article about the hidden privileges of being a part of white culture in America. In short, the classroom becomes a space where each student can begin to explore elements of their own identities that affect how much they can enter into the experiences of others. To truly encounter others, we cannot be invisible to ourselves.

The *analogy* of double consciousness, as in *Nyāya* thinking, opens a door for understanding others. Some groups are forced by the social structure to develop double consciousness, awareness of a tension between the need for an actualized self and the realities of oppression and sometimes self-denigration engendered by the surrounding culture. But those privileged by the culture must develop a double consciousness also, an awareness of both the privileges and the blindnesses of power which they somehow have to navigate in order to truly create spaces of safety, freedom, and respect for others.

Students often express gratefulness that they do not have to write either/or theses or speak from an artificially dispassionate position in their writing. A thesis in this context is a position in relation to multiple points of view, a perspective rather than a claim. For instance, one student was relieved to find that he did not have to say whether he was “for or against” allowing openly gay persons in the Boy Scouts, but rather to place the issue into context, focusing on the ethical imperative to change while respectfully acknowledging the real concerns of the sponsors involved and the practical realities of church and organizational support needed for the Scouts to remain vital. He uses the shared values of Scouting to bring the various

positions together in a hopeful, sharable solution.

To be true to the goals of *Nyāya* and invitational rhetoric, to close, I offer responses from the students concerning the course's emphases. While *Nyāya* is usually favourably received, some students, such as the following female student, remain doubtful about invitational rhetoric: "It's a nice idea, and in an ideal world it would work, but I think with the way that our society is so confrontational and approaching argument as a battle that they must win, I don't think that invitational rhetoric would be able to make a big impact or change a lot of how we approach issues but I think that it is a nice concept." Most students, however, are receptive. Another female student finds deep implications in *Nyāya* thinking: "If someone is defending an argument that is purely based on their fears or desires, they will never fully understand the opposer's argument. They will be blinded by those... and unable to learn something."

The remarks above, however, are from current students rather new to the concepts. The following response from a white female sophomore Communications major who completed the class reflects on how these models shaped her writing processes while preparing her final essay for the course:

I relate most to the Feminist form of rhetoric, the invitational form of rhetoric. The main reason I relate and stand by this form of rhetoric is because of its focus on equality and inviting the "opposition" to hear what they have to say instead of trying to force them to believe the same way they do. This rhetoric invited the audience to accept, challenge, tweak, or reject the various points of an argument. If more arguments were carried out with this form of rhetoric than the traditional form, good ideas could be transformed into great ideas and okay solutions

to a problem could turn into fantastic solutions. The outcomes of these arguments would create more benefits for the people involved than if one side simply "won" the argument. These benefits can be seen in arguments on a large scale, like American politics, and on a small scale, like an argument with friends. Instead of one side feeling defeated or not as right, both sides can be equally valued and respected and a better solution to the argument can be resolved.

In this course, particularly on the essay we are working on now, I am able to employ more of the Indian rhetorical approach to my writing. I use more examples in my writing and more comparisons to other world experiences to create a more clear argument. In this essay in particular, I am utilizing the Indian tradition to sift through my own thoughts and beliefs and emotional "hang-ups" to seek a more true basis of knowledge to add to my writing. For example, as a white person, especially one who hasn't been exposed to the idea of white privilege for a very long time, it is hard to accept that since I am white I have a type of unearned privilege. However, by sifting through my own feelings and my own mind I am able to use double consciousness to put myself into other people shoes and see things that I wouldn't have recognized originally. Using that double consciousness and recognizing that others see the world differently than I do has allowed me to be more objective in my writing and seek truth rather than let that truth be tainted by my fear of white privilege giving me an unearned power (making my accomplishments not wholly my own) or desire to ignore the white privilege that I receive every day.

The Indian and Feminist approaches to rhetoric and argument are much more useful in my writing than the traditional form of rhetoric is to create a more balanced and successful solution to a problem.

This response is exactly what I desired from my students. She is actively applying elements of the two methods, not only to her written work, but to her whole writing process. One can actually trace how knowledge of invitational rhetoric opened her up to listening to racial arguments she might have resisted otherwise. Her knowledge of Indian rhetoric offered her a way to use *Nyāya*'s stress on seeking truth beyond fear and desire, and this opened up a double consciousness in her work.

Another former student, a white male, carried the ideas from the class into his graduate work in rhetoric and composition. During the course, because he saw positive implications for invitational rhetoric in inter-religious debate, he actually took it upon himself to write Sonja Foss (one author of the invitational article) and asked her if she too had seen those implications. She wrote back, explaining that she had not looked at it that way specifically, and encouraged him to follow the ideas. He did so in his final essay for my course, and he then published a further developed version in a national undergrad publication I suggested, *Young Scholars in Writing*. I offer his work here as an example of how teaching invitational and *Nyāya* rhetoric can reach beyond the course.

Even as a scholar and an instructor I incorporate invitational rhetoric into my research and teaching. In some ways, invitational rhetoric is what I would call the lost art of conversation within both arenas. In relation to pedagogy, I incorporate Paulo Freire's view of the teacher and learner as equals, so that—in terms of invitational rhetoric's precepts—the classroom becomes a place that is “[l]oving, humble, hopeful, trusting, critical” (95). This view of argumentation as put forth by Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin has permeated my worldview so much so that it has become my understanding of what argumentation at its

greatest moments should be.

He is now working on a project showing how *Nyāya* rhetoric offers a much better model of argument than Aristotelian for interpreting Ancient religious practices.

These kinds of responses prove that crossing the borders to alternate understandings of argument are definitely worth the journey, and students and teachers alike cannot help but benefit from the experience. While Western culture is deeply entrenched in agonistic argument, the very presence of a 2,500 year old alternate model in India, as well as the positive alternatives from concerned feminist scholars, proves that other more productive methods of reasoning are not only available, but practically feasible. All that is left is for teachers of writing to lead the way.

Appendix

You Tube Videos

Shepard Smith Explodes at Naomi Wolfe!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eg8LhxYqBJs>

Excerpt a speech from my film James Baldwin Anthology

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7Of0Abi10A>

Disney Racism Examples

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rFRhLAe8lM>

Disney and Sexism

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZVjUyMsI8&feature=related>

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